

The weekly Halacha analysis

How Many Mitzvos of Hakhel are there?

Rabbi Yonason Johnson

The Gemara¹ teaches that there are 613 Mitzvos in the Torah. This is derived from the verse תורה צוה לנו משה.

The word Torah has the Gematria of 611. These are the 611 Mitzvos that were taught by Moshe at Har Sinai. Together with the Mitzvos of “I am Hashem your G-d” and “You shall not have any other gods” which we heard directly from Hashem, this totals 613.

It is accepted that this teaching is undisputed and appears to be an oral tradition tracing back to Har Sinai². Whilst the total number of 613 is accepted, there is no list in the writings of Chazal of exactly which Mitzvos are included.

As a result, we have a number of works from the early scholars, both Geonim and Rishonim, which list the 613 Mitzvos, but are each different in what they include as Mitzvos and what they do not. In his Sefer Hamitzvos, the Rambam, explains the rules or criteria (Shorashim) that he employed to determine what is counted as a Mitzvah.

The Pesukim which are the source of the Mitzvah of Hakhel teach “At the end of seven years... on the festival of Sukkos, when all of Israel come... you must read this Torah before all of Israel... Gather the people – the men, women and the children...”

In this passage we find two terms denoting a command; “read this Torah” and “gather the people”.

Two Mitzvos

Based on this, many of the enumerators of the Mitzvos understand that there are two Mitzvos of Hakhel. One is a Mitzvah for the king to read the Parshios of Hakhel (“read this Torah”). The other is a Mitzvah for the people to gather at the time, to hear the king reading from the Torah (“gather the people”).

This is the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (12th Century, France) in his work the Yereim³, who lists two separate Mitzvos and quotes the two Pesukim as being the source.

In his enumeration of the Mitzvos, the Baal Halachos Gedolos (Geonic period⁴) divides the Mitzvos into positive and negative Mitzvos and also divides between the Mitzvos incumbent on the individual and Mitzvos incumbent on the Tzibbur (community).

He records an individual Mitzvah⁵ for the king

to read the Torah at Hakhel and a separate communal Mitzvah⁶ for the people to attend and listen to this reading.

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, known by the acronym Rasa”g (9th/10th Century Babylon) also wrote a work – Sefer Hamitzvos - enumerating the 613 Mitzvos. This work is written in the form of a poem, with each Mitzvah alluded to in a few words. He also divides between positive and negative Mitzvos and communal and individual Mitzvos.

In the positive individual Mitzvos⁷ he writes והמלך יקראנה בלהקים “and the king will read it Belahakim”. It is understood⁸ that this refers to the reading of the Torah at Hakhel – the word Belahakim בלהקים comprising the same letters as בקהלים (from the word Kahal/Hakhel) meaning a gathering⁹.

In the communal Mitzvos¹⁰ he writes והעם בתרועת מלך מועדים “and the people at the blowing (of the trumpet) of the king, will gather”. This alludes to the Tosefta¹¹ that on the day of the Hakhel gathering, the Kohanim would go out into the public spaces in Yerushalaim and blow golden trumpets to call the Jewish people to gather for Hakhel. They did so as Shluchim of the king.

Only 1 Mitzvah

In contrast to the above works, the Rambam in his Sefer Hamitzvos lists only 1 Mitzvah of Hakhel¹²; “we are commanded to gather the entire people together on the second day of Sukkos in the year after Shemittah and they shall read verses...”.

In the Rambam’s understanding, the two elements of Hakhel – the gathering and the reading of the Torah, are two parts of a single Mitzvah.

The Sefer Hachinuch, a classic 13th Century work which details the Mitzvos according to the order in which they are found in the Torah by Parsha, also lists only one Mitzvah of Hakhel that comprises two elements¹³; “The Mitzvah of Hakhel in the year after the seventh year – we are commanded that the Jewish people should gather and to read before them from the book of Mishneh Torah (Devarim).”

He writes that if either the people do not gather to hear the Torah or the king does not read the Torah, they would be negating the positive Mitzvah of Hakhel.

This is also the view of the Sefer Mitzvos Gadol

– Semag (Rabbi Moshe ben Yaakov of Couci 13th Century) who counts only 1 Mitzvah of Hakhel¹⁴.

The Acharonim¹⁵ ask why these authorities do not count two Mitzvos of Hakhel as suggested from the Pesukim and as recorded by the other works on the Mitzvos discussed above.

A possible explanation;

Unlike other Mitzvos, the Torah teaches the reason for Hakhel – as indicated by the use of the word למטן (in order...). The purpose of the Mitzvah is to instil in the hearts of the people and to inspire them to fear Hashem and to commit themselves to the observance of the Mitzvos of the Torah. The Rebbe explains that this is not just the reason for the Mitzvah but is the very essence of the Mitzvah.

In the words of the Rambam¹⁶: “It is a positive commandment to gather together the entire Jewish people - men, women, and children - after every Sabbatical year when they ascend for the pilgrimage holiday and to read so that they hear passages from the Torah that encourage them to perform mitzvot and strengthen them in the true faith - דת האמת

In a subsequent Halacha¹⁷ he writes even more strongly; “One who is unable to hear should focus his attention on this reading, for Scripture established it **solely to strengthen the true faith.**”

Based on this understanding, there is only one Mitzvah of Hakhel. The essence of the Mitzvah is achieved through the gathering of the people and the king reading before them the Parshios of the Torah.

In his commentary, the Malbim explains how each detail of the Mitzvah facilitated the objective of Hakhel, including; the timing, the specific Parshios read, the location, the gathering and the reading by the king.

Being in such a holy place in the presence of Hashem, after a year of Shemittah immersed in learning Torah, seeing millions of Jews together focusing on the reading of Hashem’s words, by the king—Hashem’s chosen one, who stands with awe and dedication, all of this would certainly make a great and lasting impression and instil within their hearts the fear of Hashem and inspire them to observe all of the words of this Torah

Sources on reverse